

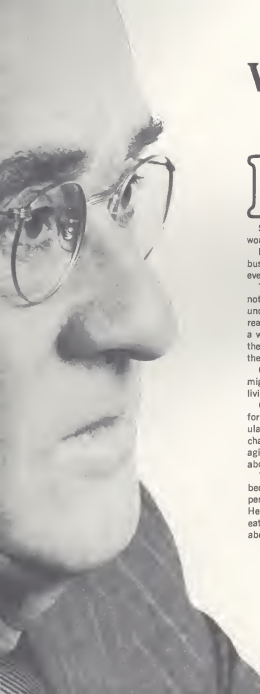


GOD THE SECRET KEEPER
AND OTHER
SUCH REFLECTIONS

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Worry about the

People worry. Most everyone I know worries. People worry about almost anything, everything. If they don't have anything to worry about at the moment, they worry that they don't have anything to worry about!

Some people even worry about other folks who don't worry. The worriers think the non-worriers should worry.

Honestly now, maybe we'll never be finished with this business of worrying. It's a misery that afflicts virtually every age.

There was a day when youth seemed to escape it. But not anymore. Some psychologists say that the hard-to-understand behavior of the young may stem from the realization that they are the first generation to grow up in a world with the possibility of nuclear annihilation before them. They worry about a tomorrow that could be denied them!

Our elder friends worry. While youths worry that they might not get to live very long, the aging worry about living too long!

Our senior citizens are concerned about who will care for them in their last years. To top it off, half of the population is less than 30 years old, a generation frequently characterized as having little respect for the aged and the aging. Surely we've given our elders something to worry about!

We all worry. Yet we must face the question: Does it become a Christian to worry? Turn your thoughts to that penniless preacher who once stood on a Judean hilltop. He said people should not think too much about what to eat or what to wear. Those were the wrong things to worry about.

He recommended they learn how to handle life: take it

right things

as it has been measured out from the dawn of creation—a day at a time.

His message was that people were worrying about things that shouldn't overly concern them. He wanted them to know that a heavenly father takes care of these things. We are to be stewards of what he provides and trust his unfailing providence.

He said in his great sermon that if we really wanted to know where to direct our concerns, we should think in terms of the kingdom of God. By that he meant: worry about how to get along with your neighbors, your friends, your enemies. Worry about whether you're going to have enough love to share. Worry about people lost to sin, who live and die without hope.

If you must worry about food and clothing, worry about the countless number who don't have enough to eat and who shiver from the cold.

By reading a good portion of the sixth chapter of Matthew where Jesus is talking about worry, you'll discover that he's trying to make one thing clear: don't worry about the wrong things! Dare we assume that he's admitting that it's our nature to worry?

Our Lord is proposing: let's divide it up a bit! You worry about whether you're in the kingdom or not and whether other folks are in it, and I'll see that the harvest doesn't fail. Take my word for it. See how well the birds of the air and the lilies of the field fare!

But we don't take his word for it, and we struggle anxiously from day to day just because we don't trust him fully. We go to our graves with faces drawn by the worry that wearies us, by the worry that wears us out. And all the while the echo of the voice of the penniless preacher haunts us, since man was never meant to die with a worried look on his face. ■



. . . God's been called a lot of things. Do you suppose anyone's ever accused Him of being a Secret-Keeper? Presumably. Such a descriptive sure would fit. 'Twould seem that way, wouldn't it? How much information have you gotten out of Him lately as to how long you're going to live? What will be the shape of things for you ten years from now? What happens in the moment of death? Why good people can be treated badly? Keep secrets? Of course, God does. And He has His reasons; good ones, of course . . .

God The Secret Keeper

The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever.

—Deut. 29:29

God is the great secret-keeper. At least, that is the way He often appears to man, who is constantly curious. Although baffled and perplexed by God's apparent unwillingness to tell all He knows, we go on asking questions, driven so naturally by that most persistent word "why".

Because it is through curiosity that we learn much, we are inclined to think that God wants us to ask, else how can He give the answers in which He delights?

But why doesn't He tell us everything? Just why are there some things which God keeps to Himself? Honestly now, don't we all at one time or another, in this way or that, turn to God asking:

"How long have I yet to live?"

"Where and what will be my lot ten years from now?"

"What happens the minute I die?"

"Why don't you, God, put a stop to all evil?"

There are so many times when we would like God to give the answers that He alone can give. But He doesn't. What, then, can we do?

There was once a person who confided in his pastor that he gave up interest in religion because he had been convinced "that all the big questions are those to which there are no answers." In despair, we might be inclined to think the same way if we did not know in our hearts that this is false. But we must admit that God does have His secrets, and that a requirement of true religion lies in the recognition of a certain degree of reverent agnosticism.

Refusal to recognize this can lead to the frustration which is the lot of all those who continue pounding on doors which remain locked, and there is no peace. There can be no peace, except through faith.

Why does God keep some things secret? Could it be that since much of our curiosity is speculative (an attempt to peer into the future) that God would discourage all this by His silence? An unveiling of the hidden could be frightening, and such fear could cripple us as we are confronted by the demands of what lies at hand.

God keeps His secrets for another reason. He withholds from us what we can't understand. Jesus said to His trusted disciples that He had much more to tell them but they were not yet ready. It isn't safe to assume that we would be better Christians if we knew everything.

I'd rather cast my lot with the man who may know only one or two things about God, and who trusts Jesus for all else. It is a principle of good theology and sound religion that it isn't what or how much one may know, but rather Whom one knows.

Our chief concern is not what God keeps to Himself, for secrets He has. Rather, we must concern ourselves with what in His wisdom He has seen fit to reveal to us. Centuries ago, the writer of our text came to this conclusion.

God wants us to know His nature and His character. The meaning of the incarnation is echoed clearly in the words of the Galilean carpenter's son, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father."

The revelation is full and complete. In and through Christ, the whole story of God is known. Confronted by Him, we need no longer ask questions; with Thomas we can exclaim, "My Lord and my God!"

All of this God offers us — this is the secret which He openly declares. And it is a tragic thing when man does not fully claim for himself what God offers him. But there is something worse — that is never passing this on to children to whom it also is intended. The ancient writer of the Biblical text says that what God reveals belongs to children too.

This could be the moment in judgment that we should fear most . . . our unwillingness to live by the revelation of God in Christ . . . our failure to share this truth with our children.

. . . ask some folks how they are and they'll tell you. In no time at all you'll get plenteous portion of pill-by-pill and pain-by-pain patter of their pesky, persistent, pernicious problem. And sooner or later (mostly sooner, of course) God will be dragged into the picture and given a good dressing down. Not so that man named Paul. Bless his soul! He had a thorn-in-the-flesh all right — but he also found out that he had something else. He had a name for it: grace sufficient . . .

Thorn In The Flesh

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh.

—II Corinthians 12:7

What do you think was Paul's thorn in the flesh? None of us knows exactly. We are given to understand that he seldom talked about it, and never in any of his letters did he specifically name it. This is unusual. How different from the hesitant "How are you?" that is given to some people, lest such inquiry become an invitation to seemingly endless patter . . . to a pill-by-pill and to a pain-by-pain description of their affliction.

While we don't know for certain what Paul's thorn in the flesh was, we are intrigued by the fact that he barely mentioned it. What is it that we can learn from this man of God and his irritating weakness?

Let us observe at once that saints suffer too. Completely dedicated servant of the Lord that he was, heaven did not offer him as standard equipment an invisible shield. Saints are daily exposed to all that is common to humanity. We who cannot so much as touch the garments of men like Paul have little right to rebel against fate with an agonizing lament of "I don't know why this had to happen to me." No man's apparent virtue, real or assumed, entitles him to preferential treatment. Christian biography teaches as one of its first lessons that there is no "hot-house" saint.

Then, too, we note that Paul, so very much aware of the pesky thorn, reacted in a very human way. His one and only thought concerning that thorn in the flesh was to be rid of it. So he kept asking God to take it away. Again and again it must have been high priority on his prayer list. Undoubtedly he built up for himself a rather reasonable case. Surely he gave God good reasons.

Perhaps he implored God this way: "Don't you understand God? Can't you see how much good I could get done for You if I didn't have to be troubled with the terrible 'thing'. Please take it away. If not for my sake, then for Your sake and for the sake of all the people I want to help, take it away.

"I could preach with greater stamina. I could do three days' work in one. I could cover more territory and reach more people.

I'll never get into expanded mission stations at this rate. It's this plagued thing of taking time out to gather my strength. I want to run. Now I can do little more than crawl with such great pain and frustration. Please, God, I've good reasons. Take it away."

Every reader of the Bible knows how God answered that prayer. The thorn was not taken away. What does a saint do when his earnest prayers go without desired favor?

There's an uncomfortable and unpleasant thought for us. It is true that God doesn't always grant the specific requests of his saints. We must remember that the God to whom we pray is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the cruel cross of Calvary and the bitter cup of Gethsemane were not kept from Jesus despite His entreaty, we dare not presume a partiality that Jesus never knew.

Let it be understood that if a saint cannot see the hands of God working in his behalf, then he must do the next best thing. He must listen intently to hear what the parting lips of Jesus Christ will say to him. What Paul heard Him say, countless others have been told. God's triumphant declaration . . . "I will give you my grace, I will give you my strength; I will make you perfect in weakness" . . . has brought new life and everlasting hope and peace to countless people throughout the world.

Some few years ago there was a business man in our land who gave all his energy to furthering his own interests. His whole world centered around himself. Then one day he was stricken. Through prayer and medical science the terrible paralysis which had set in gave way. When his speech came back, these were among his first words: "I have had everything except God; now I have nothing but God."

When he sent out his Christmas greetings that year he enclosed with every one of them these lines from an anonymous writer:

"He prayed for strength that he might achieve; he was made weak that he might obey. He prayed for health that he might do great things; he was given infirmity that he might do better things. He prayed for riches that he might be happy; he was given poverty that he might be wise. He prayed for power that he might have the praise of men; he was given weakness that he might feel the need for God. He prayed for all things that he might enjoy life; he was given life that he might enjoy all things."

. . . when will folks ever get their thinking straight on this whole business of conversion? Why will they be foolish enough to think it's not important? Why will they go on believing that it's something reserved only for so-called rascals? Why will they convince themselves that it doesn't occur unless it happens in a split-second? That man named Nicodemus, night caller that he was, got a great deal of light thrown on this from one who knew exactly what He was talking about . . .

Turnabout

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

—John 3:5

Every Sunday school scholar knows that there was a man named Nicodemus. He was a fine chap, learned and held in high regard by those who knew him. He was decent, too, and religious.

Note that last word — “religious”. It simply means that he was fully aware of the fact of God and was acquainted with the way in which He was to be worshiped and the manner of life that becomes a so-called God-fearing man. He was not unreligious. But it isn’t enough just to be “religious”. That’s the message that Jesus tried to get through to this famous night caller.

The sad fact is that the “religious” people in Jesus’ day really caused Him more grief than those who never got around to learning the commandments and saying their prayers.

When Nicodemus came to see Jesus that night, our blessed Lord did His best to set him straight. He said to him rather bluntly:

“You’ve got to be born again — born of the spirit.”

I don’t know whether Nicodemus fully understood Jesus. I do know, however, that a lot of persons today refuse to come to terms with those words of Jesus — either because they are insensitive to what He said or because they don’t want to go to the trouble to learn what He meant. What a pity!

Let me put it this way, and with all the strength that I can command: We never really appreciate the Christian experience until we

know what it is to be born anew. Call it what you will — “rebirth”, “conversion” or “regeneration” — by whatever term, it constitutes the necessary ingredient, the basic element of the Christian experience.

These days when I set about to read the New Testament as though I had never seen its pages before, I am thrilled all over again as I recognize the way one person after another appears as someone whose life has been turned about — reborn, converted, transformed. It’s all there; the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of people.

They know themselves to be inside the circle of believers. They talk about being “in Christ.” They say with blessed assurance that they are Christ’s; so much so that each one becomes “a new person altogether.”

There’s nothing like it. It is absolutely wonderful. But some persons who ought to be thoroughly enjoying this tremendous experience deny themselves a measure of joy because they have the mistaken idea that, unless it happens to them exactly as it did to Paul, it just hasn’t happened. What a pity!

Now don’t get me wrong. The change in a man possessed by the Spirit should be quite obvious. But the method by which the Spirit effects this change may vary from person to person. For some it may be dramatic; for others it may be gradual. But change must occur.

One final word — discard the notion that conversion is something that’s meant only for “rascals” — the worst kind of sinners — who you and I say we are not!

Don’t forget that Jesus spoke these words to a very “decent” chap, to a very “moral” person, to a “religious” leader. It was to this kind of person that Jesus spoke so forthrightly about “being born again.”

The man who was different

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John."—(JOHN 1:6)

JOHN was something else. That means he was different, very different from average people. Folks in his day branded him every bit the eccentric that he was. In voice and manner, he was all and more that you would expect a man from the wilderness to be.

But he's not to be sold short just because he was unconventional and did not move about in traditional ways.

This we must remember at once: God often works through the unforming. It may not be a pleasant fact to accept, since most of us prefer the routine handling of people and things.

It's a lot easier to deal with the usual, with the run-of-the-mill. In such instances, we can predict patterns of human behavior, but to handle the eccentric may take a bit of doing because we're never quite sure how he's going to react.

John's strength undoubtedly lay in the fact that he was so different. No one in his generation, except our Lord, took the fact of God so seriously. Everywhere he went he was forever, and persistently, pointing his finger at people and shouting powerfully such words as "sinner"—"repent"—"be baptized." All life was a matter of judgment, and God was not to be ignored because time was running out for them.

Never had his generation seen or heard anything like him. The recorder of the Fourth Gospel refers to him as one for whom only God had an explanation. Remember how it's stated in the words of our text—John, "a man sent from God."

But look also at the stamp of approval that Jesus himself put upon this "something-else-sort-of-person." It was the Master who said of him the grandest thing that he ever said of any man: "None born of woman is greater than he."

See him then at once for what he was—someone quite unlike anyone else. In doing so, will you limit God's activity only through people like him? Will you immediately begin excusing yourself because the Master has never praised you as extravagantly as he did John?

Will you rationalize by saying that John is one-of-a-kind, the once-in-a-generation variety? Me? I am plain, ungifted, ordinary—just like everyone else. So you think God may not expect much from the average and the ordinary, is that it?

Let us look at it this way. All life is important to God. He allows the extraordinary as the encouragement and the inspiration we lesser folk need. In John is written largely what should be plainly read in the finer print of our lives: A sense of mission and meaning.

John made every day, every occasion, every contact with a single person count for God. We are to be

discouraged from believing that we are less capable of the same, although we may have to live and work within our limitations.

The tragedy that stalks many people in our time is that they live their days and years with no sense of purpose or meaning. Sometimes, I think of all the reasons one could name for the attractiveness of

Christianity. Here's one that could be included: The Christian faith gives a meaning and a purpose to one's days, months, and years.

When men remembered John's years, they recalled God's stamp on him and phrased it perfectly: He was one sent from God. That must mean that wherever he went he felt obligated to do what God wanted done. It must have been his magnificent obsession.

What's yours, friend? Life has a way of branding us by the things we want most. If you're at least 40, you won't have to tell anyone. By this time, it's already self-revealing! And in the end every man writes his own epitaph.

What is yours to be? ■



. . . Jesus could cut people short. Once He did it to a lady who got carried away at the sight of Him. Nobly intentioned, she became most effusive. She just couldn't keep her mouth shut. No matter how extravagant her praise, Jesus gave her to understand (and the people around them) that words in themselves, grand and true as they may be, are just never enough . . .

More Than Words

But He said, Yea rather, blessed are they that bear the Word of God, and keep it.

—Luke 11:28

These words constitute the blunt reply of our Lord to a woman who had been obviously carried away with emotion. With little restraint, if any, she had exclaimed something about how wonderful it would be to mother a son like Him. She meant her words as a grand compliment.

But Jesus seemingly cut her short. There isn't so much as a "thank you, lady" on His part. It wasn't every day that He heard such nice things. One would be inclined to think that He would have singled her out of the crowd and praised her profusely for her heart-warming salutation.

Having to swim daily against the tide of public opinion, her words could have been, to say the least, the pause that encourages. Rather sternly, He replied that a more blessed response is when people, having heard God's word, obey it. It was one way of saying that words (no matter how nice and true) are never enough.

It could be that Jesus was thinking of things to come. There were certain shadows in tomorrow's sky. Peter would deny. Judas would betray. Thomas and all the others would run and hide. The Palm Sunday hallelujah chorus would become one mad shout for murder. How could He wax enthusiastic over her words?

This is not to say that compliments concerning Christ are not in order. Christianity needs her friends and is grateful for those who clearly speak well of her. The grand old Scots woman was perfectly right when she spoke her parting words to her preacher son . . . "and whatever else you do, lad, speak a good word for Jesus Christ."

Yet words in themselves, it must be said over and over, are never enough. The com-

pliments we offer Christ become acceptable to Him only as we back them up with conviction expressed in deeds. The text indicates as much. Whatever feeling of well-being the lady in the crowd must have enjoyed, even at the sound of her own words, was quickly dissipated by Jesus. He knew too many people who allowed their pious praises to substitute for actual performance. His is the perfect right to warn people that they are judged not by what they say about God but by what they do for and with God.

We recognize at once the very integrity of the life of Jesus. He stands towering above all others as the Master of human destiny. This, mark you, not because of His sayings (and we readily recall that "never man spoke like Him") but because of the way His life became the vital expression of His words. What He preached and how He lived are the same thing.

There are times when the follower of Christ may ask himself the questions, "Am I inside the Kingdom? How can I be sure?" The safe and sure sign will be not what we say or think about Christ but rather what we actually do for Him day by day. Why do we love and serve Christ? Why do we call Him Lord and Master? Is it because we keep reciting words that He taught?

Significantly enough, the great symbol of the Christian faith is not the Galilean preacher atop the hill but rather that victorious Christ standing on the other side of a wooden cross.

Edwyn Bevan says in his book, "Christianity," that as a matter of mere psychological fact, the thought of the cross has counted far more, as the mainspring, throughout 19 centuries of Christian devotion, of Christian service and Christian self-sacrifice, than the Sermon on the Mount. What Jesus was and did is greater and more wonderful than what He said.

Words are important. Didn't Jesus come preaching? But His words we remember not because of the way He said them, but because of the way in which He lived them.

*. . . every time in the ranks of the redeemed a man
falls out, defects, disqualifies himself, the rest of us should
be ready to fill the gap . . .*

A Man Named Matthias

And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven disciples.

—Acts 1:26

It was a kind of reunion of the charter group. Those present were the original band of disciples plus Mary, the mother of Jesus. Also included were the brothers of our Lord. Only one of the Twelve was absent. Judas, the betrayer, had committed suicide.

Peter, a kind of self-appointed chairman, observed later when a larger number had gathered that the time had come again for 12 to be in the disciple band. With this they all agreed. He reminded them of their last session with the Ascending Christ, who charged them to be about extending the Kingdom.

People have a way of remembering the last words of those they love. So, the words of the Master remained ringing in their ears — "Go, preach, teach, baptize, make disciples — begin at Jerusalem — go into all the world!" It was a commission of great proportion. Naturally, they thought in terms of bringing the complement of disciples up to its original size. This was a reasonable first step as they planned to be about their Master's business.

It is surprising, though, that Peter had any takers for his suggestion. One might think that there would have been pronounced reluctance upon their part to name the 12th man, a successor to a betrayer. If among our Lord's choices there turned out a Judas, what reason would they have to believe that their wisdom could be trustworthy? The amazing thing is that they were willing to take a chance on someone else. Why was this possible?

The answer to this important question lies in the fact that over a six-week period, between the Crucifixion and the Ascension, Jesus especially appeared to the 11. Each of them in turn, who had forsaken Jesus, found himself re-established in the fellowship. He had a way, figuratively speaking, of putting His arms around them and saying:

"I trust you. I've come back to you, and I want to fashion anew the bond that you broke. I still believe in you, and I have no other way by which to suggest that the Kingdom advance . . . Matthew, Andrew, Bartholomew,

Simon Peter — each of you — you're still my man! I charge you all over again with the responsibility that I entrusted to you."

From that moment, each one of the disciples knew himself to be in the company of the forgiven. When Jesus Christ does this for them, dare they do less for another? Here is reason enough for them to have faith in someone else.

Now, on what basis was Matthias chosen? Even though they chose by lots, a great deal of soul-searching entered into their thinking as they named the two men against whom the lot would be drawn. We can read for ourselves in the closing verses of the first chapter of the book of Acts the criteria which they laid down.

They were most demanding in their requirements — only those could qualify who themselves had first-hand knowledge of Christ and His Resurrection, and who could therefore serve as an effective witness. He would have to be someone who with them had been in the company of Jesus. None other need entertain the thought of being considered.

History has recorded their choice, a man named Matthias. He is remembered as the successor to Judas.

In a certain sense, every single one of us could become a successor to Judas. Every time in the ranks of the redeemed a man falls out, defects, becomes a betrayer, and thus disqualifies himself, all the rest of us ought to invite consideration for the disciple's post. But can we qualify as did Matthias?

Matthias reminds us that such people are available by virtue of their qualifications — a first-hand experience of Jesus Christ and bona-fide witnessing to this effect.

Almost 2,000 years have passed since Jesus Christ gave His commission. The words ring in our ears too. In these latter days, when non-Christian religions are spreading with a growth that exceeds that of the Christian faith, we need to look for those who will help bring our contingent of effective witnesses to full strength.

The virility of the early church was characterized by those who, like Matthias, could testify from personal experience that Jesus Christ is alive. This was the witnessing that commanded respect. So Matthias was chosen. The contemporary church is desperately in need of his kind.

. . . it's easy not to believe in angels. A great many people, so it would seem, won't give them a second glance let alone a first look. Why? For one thing, we're a somewhat sophisticated generation and the whole business of angels can't stand up at the slightest scientific stare sent their way. So what? Love can't be proven scientifically, either. Nor can God. I like the idea of angels; if for no other reason it makes sense to me because God should be entitled to deal on occasion with something better than our blundering humanity . . .

Speaking of Angels

Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.

—Matthew 18:10

To those of us in the 20th Century, the text seems strangely put. And we are the poorer because of it. The people, however, who heard our Lord talk this way must have found their hearts warmed by what He said.

We'd better give it a second look. By doing so, perhaps the text will speak to us as it did to those who first heard the words. Undoubtedly, it is the reference to angels that causes us to keep our distance, because we are a people who apparently have lost interest in such beings.

In the day of Jesus, people believed easily in angels. The Bible writers spoke of them. In the Old Testament, they were constantly referred to as the "army of heaven," and they occasionally were mentioned in different orders or ranks. The highest of these were the Seraphim and the Cherubim. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul said something about four other orders. Then, of course, we know that there are such divisions as archangels and angels.

The Jewish people in the time of Christ believed that each nation had its patron angel. Each of the seven churches mentioned by John in the Revelation had its angel. Job had an angel, and so did Peter. And who was it but angels who were sent by God to minister to Christ after His temptation in the wilderness.

Shame upon our sophistication that makes it so difficult to accept what even our Lord did not reject. While we say it was but the thought-form of His day, is there no truth here?

Unquestionably, it must be the pride in man which rules out angels, for in giving them no credence he holds that the Heavenly Father "can have no orders of personal life better than our blundering humanity."

Scientifically, we cannot prove the existence of angels. Nor can we scientifically prove

the fact of God, the love of a man for a woman, the parent for a child.

Nevertheless, all people, both Christian and heathen, have generally agreed that men are not alone in an otherwise empty universe. It is the Bible writers in particular who make something unusually grand of this. Each, in turn, seemed to believe rather clearly that God created angels before He created anything else. They were allowed to watch Him as He completed the works of creation, and there is even the reference to the fact that they thoroughly delighted in all that He had made for "they shouted for joy."

Before we go any further, let it be said that it would be quite useless to ask what angels are like. There is nothing with which they can be compared in our limited physical world. The artist pictures them with wings in his attempt to help us think about them. But his noblest efforts remain but pictures. We have been told that on occasion angels did appear, and when they did so they looked much like ordinary men. Yet they were appearances only.

There is always the temptation to drop this whole matter. So much remains in mystery when we talk about angels. We do well to take the text then at face value. And if we should, what now does it tell us?

Whatever else the text may say, it fairly shouts in a unique way of the preciousness which is human personality: Every child has a guardian angel. Immediately, the sacredness of childhood is magnified. Furthermore, the angels that watch over children have direct access to God at any time. That's what the text means when it talks about "their angels always behold the face of the Father." God never turns away from the concern of a child!

The imagery of Scripture is that of a royal court where direct access to the King is limited to a select few. So important in God's sight are children that their guardian angels enjoy this priority.

We, therefore, must keep our eyes upon the children in our midst — if for no other reason than the fact that they are so prized by God. That's why every decision we make must be determined with the child's welfare utmost in our minds.

. . . we'd better get around to the fact that God doesn't always smile. Sure, it is a lot easier to think of Him as one who looks upon us benignly. But there are times when He can be angry. At what? Better still, with whom? That tent-mender-who-became-a-preacher came up with quite an answer to that last question: with whom? He seemed to believe that God becomes infuriated most with people who disobey; who should know better than to do what they do . . .

God Doesn't Always Smile

*For which things' sake the wrath of God
cometh on the children of disobedience.*

—Colossians 3:6

Christians usually picture God with a smile on His face. The Gospel which they proclaim is that of a loving heavenly Father with arms outstretched in blessing. He is forever gracious and deals mercifully with the children of men.

But it is not at all un-Christian to sometimes think of God without His smile. That's the very point which Paul makes in the above verse.

He speaks clearly of the wrath of God. Paul is no less Christian when he talks like this; rather, he is more so than some in our day who think only of God's kindness and never of His sternness in judgment.

Too long, we have soft-pedalled or ignored "the other side" of God's nature. We cheapen the quality of His love when we do not think about His justice. We need to appreciate anew the historic creeds of Christendom which re-echo the Biblical truth that the Savior will come again — to judge!

The people who especially ought to give heed to such teaching are those who call themselves His children, for they are the ones who, if disobedient, will endure the greater portion of His wrath. The text puts it clearly:

"The wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience."

Calvary's unforgettable reminder of God's redeeming love is the forgiveness which is offered the ignorant; the wrath is reserved for the disobedient! Pondering this truth unsettles us, and rightly so. For if there is no wrath, there is no love; and love alone gives the meaning to wrath.

God, Who freely gives us salvation out of pure love, cannot love easily or look lightly upon the sin that would send a man to hell. It is just because He loves us in our sin that He just as vigorously despises our wickedness and becomes extremely angry and highly displeased with the disobedience we exhibit.

We have reason to believe that we can ask God to forgive us for the sins we have committed in our ignorance and in the immature days of our youth. But to ask God to forgive us for all the things we go on doing deliberately in disobedience is to bring down His wrath.

This is what we should fear most. None of us has any right to believe that God will excuse the disobedient.

Isn't this why God has gone to such great length to show us His way and to reveal His will to us? Doesn't the Bible make plain to us His desire to find us His obedient children that we should be saved?

Novelist A. J. Cronin recounts for us the tragic life of a man who deliberately turned from what he knew was the far better path he should have chosen. This is always the greater sin — to prefer disobedience.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged April 9, 1945, by the Nazis has left us a wonderful legacy from his all-too short 39 years of life lived in depth. His writings take us to task for our appropriation of what he calls "cheap grace."

We preach the forgiveness of God but do not stress the demands of the disciplined life which should be the grateful response of the redeemed.

Instructed by this 20th Century martyr, we are reminded of two things. First, and this is the heart of the Gospel, that a man is saved by the outstretched and redeeming arm of Christ. Through faith, we grasp what God freely offers. But this is not the end of things.

Secondly, there must be the obedience which follows. Or to put it as Christ Himself expressed it, "Go, and sin no more!"

And this is what Paul is saying once more to the early church, and to us — there is such a terrible thing as the wrath of God. None will know it more so than they who could have averted it, since we are not saved to become disobedient.

God does not have two faces, but His smile can turn to anger. To remember this plays a very essential part of our salvation.

The man who wouldn't keep quiet



It must have been common talk around Jerusalem. Folks probably said: "If that fellow doesn't watch out, he's going to get himself killed. Why doesn't someone tell him to keep quiet?"

Such was the impression which Stephen, the first Christian martyr, must have made upon people. He was young; he was daring; and what is more, he couldn't keep his mouth shut. One group of Christians after another had either been mobbed or thrown into prison. Only the worst remained, and it was about to happen—to Stephen.

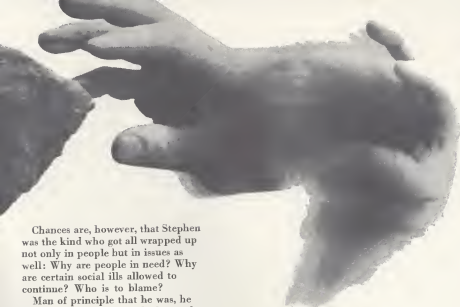
Stephen was one of the men chosen by the early Christians to serve as a church councilman. Among his duties was the assignment to visit the

poor and the needy. When people couldn't come to church, Stephen would be among those who would take the church to them.

Commissioned to minister to the needy, Stephen was never one to be content with running errands—no matter how merciful. He could never be happy just taking a bag of groceries into somebody's home.

Stephen was a man who had to preach. If ever he had the slightest chance to tell people about Jesus, he began speaking. When he found evidence of opposition among those who were "stiff-necked and stubborn," he told them off in no uncertain manner. People won't stand very long for anyone who talks so recklessly, albeit daringly.

It all happened, of course, because Stephen permitted himself to become involved. If only he had taken the package of groceries, placed it on the kitchen table, put on his hat and gone his way—if only he had been interested solely in gathering the funds and distributing to the needy. If only he had stopped there.



Chances are, however, that Stephen was the kind who got all wrapped up not only in people but in issues as well: Why are people in need? Why are certain social ills allowed to continue? Who is to blame?

Man of principle that he was, he couldn't compromise with the truth in Christ as he knew it. That's why we remember him as we do—the first Christian martyr. What is a martyr? A martyr is one who goes on believing in the right, even though in the end such a course of action leads to certain death.

The church is made weak by the fact that most of us never know what it is to face death as Stephen did. We have a way of tripping along through life rather merrily. Very few of us for principle's sake have ever been crushed to the ground, broken in body, and almost destroyed in spirit.

Do you know how Stephen died? The infuriated mob took him bodily and threw him down from the brow of a hill into an enclosure from which he could not escape. The crazed tormentors reached for the biggest stones they could grasp. These they hurled at him until his bones were crushed, the ground was stained by his blood, and there was no longer life.

We marvel at the way Stephen died. It was with a prayer upon his lips. The recorder put it this way: "And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

Strikingly enough the writer of the Book of the Acts didn't say—"and then he died." Stephen was made of the stuff of saints, and saints never die. They are constantly in league with the Eternal. The body may be broken, but the spirit remains inviolate.

What sustained him? The answer lies in the fact that he never took his eyes away from God. It is here that you and I so frequently run into trouble. We focus our eyes upon the burden; we keep thinking of those who treat us unkindly. Stephen's face, so the Bible tells us, was transfigured because all the while he never took his mind off God. ■

. . . some people have so many meetings to attend, so many resolutions to frame, so many pronouncements to fashion, so many prayers to offer, so many sermons that they either want to write or listen to that they don't have any time left, mark you, they don't have any time left to practice what they profess . . . what a shame!

Jericho Road

*But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed,
came where he was; and when he saw him, he
had compassion on him.*

—Luke 10:33

The parable of the Good Samaritan is unforgettable. It remains remembered for the simple fact that life itself is like a Jericho Road.

You readily recall the story, don't you? There was the man, for whatever cause it was that took him from Jerusalem to Jericho, who was left in the way, having been beaten by robbers. Two men, so the story continues, came upon the scene somewhat later. While both probably were good and honest men, even (I hesitate to say it) religious men, they did not stop to help the unfortunate chap. The priest and the Levite must have had some reasons that kept them hurrying on their way. At any rate, the Good Book says that they did not offer a hand to a badly hurt fellow.

None of us can forget that there also came that same way someone who, seeing the misery of the man, took it upon himself to be a one-man first-aid crew. Such is the bare outline of one of the best-known parables. Day by day we observe the passing scene and occasionally find ourselves cast in the role of at least one of the characters mentioned.

Four types appear. The most casual of readers notes how clearly they stand out.

First there are the fallen and the hurt. They are the ones who can't take the cruel pressure of the unkind, the unexpected, and the unfair. They lie helplessly aside, depending upon the help that might not come.

The second group, of course, is made up of those who exist at the expense of other people. They are the ones who make it a business to hurt and to defraud. They thrive upon the misfortune they create. Fortunately they are few in number; unfortunately, their work is downright devilish.

Humanity has a third grouping. It is made up of people who travel the same road where others have fallen, but who give them no help.

The parable referring to the priest and the Levite, says that "they pass by on the other side." They are more, let us say, indifferent than they are selfish; they are more pre-occupied than they are unconcerned. Since they have so many meetings to attend, they have such little time to practise what they preach!

Sadly enough, this third segment of mankind seems to be increasing. Today we get fancier resolutions from committee after committee, while fewer folk endeavor to aid the discouraged and the destitute by direct personal encounter.

Life hardly would be worth living if these were the only ones to travel the road. What a pathetic thing it would be to live each day as one who robbed, was robbed, or who paid no attention to the distressed and the needy.

However, our Blessed Lord introduced another character. He called him "a certain Samaritan," and he is the one who stands for all who help by extending a supporting arm and a hand that lifts. When the Master related the parable, He had but one point that He wished to make plain. As He ended it, He said that we are to live in the spirit of the man who unhesitatingly helped.

God's directive is clearly put . . . "Go, and do likewise!" Therefore, we should say to ourselves that while we have no right to cause people misfortune, neither dare we go on our way in merciless fashion as the misery of the broken continues. We who would follow Him are in duty bound to assume on the Jericho Road the role of the character He recommends.

Consideration for others is perhaps the one thing that this world of ours is short on now. While we have learned so much in so many ways, yet so few really master the fine art of being kind. It is very exciting for some people today to get interested in the man on the moon. But what about the man next door . . . or at the end of the street . . . whose life could be revolutionized here and now if only a kind look were given him or a lifting hand offered him?

He who wears the halo on the Jericho Road of life is the one who takes it upon himself to be neighbor to the nearest man at hand!

. . . go ahead and say it: a good carpenter, Jesus was a better preacher. His earthly father saw to the former; His heavenly father took care of the latter. And He excelled in preaching, of course, by the way He got the truth across winsomely — and when needed — in pointed fashion. That's the way it was that day when He shook some people up by placing a value judgment on two men at prayer. One came out with flying colors; the other one tripped himself up with, of all things, mind you, his own hand-fashioned balo . . .

Saints Beware

He spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.

—Luke 18:9

A good carpenter, Jesus was a better preacher. There is a passage in the Good Book which refers to His success as a preacher. It goes something like this: "All the people were very attentive to hear Him" (Luke 19:48).

When He was preaching, He introduced a surprise element so that the force of truth could make its own rightful impact in a sudden and unexpected way.

In the text for this meditation, we're given some idea as to how Jesus felt about the persons who became the target of His direct words on this occasion.

This is the way it happened. He told them a story — and He told it superbly — about two men. One was a so-called good guy, and the other a bad man. The fellow who presumably would rate high in our book had a fairly enviable record: He knew his Bible and he was a strict traditionalist, pricking the people's conscience if they were about to forget what the ancients had to say about the way to live.

Furthermore, he wasn't tight with his money. He was generous. If the church said give one-tenth of what the fields produce, this man said he'd give one-tenth of all his earnings!

Then there was the other fellow. Really, he'd been quite a rascal — a tax collector for a foreign power who exploited his own people. That's about all we can say about him and his low-down behavior.

According to the story Jesus told, they both "went up to the temple to pray." We're given a clear-cut picture of what happened there.

The good guy spent all his time telling God of his exemplary record and extraordinary behavior.

To make his point, as though God needed supportive evidence, he called divine attention to the miserable soul who by his own admission was a sinner. He was so bad off that he couldn't think of a single good deed to name to his credit. All he could do was hang his head, beat his breast, and say, "God, be merciful."

Then Jesus drove home with utmost force His value judgment on each of them. It came as a surprise. He condemned the one and praised the other. But the fellow who got the praise was the sinner, while the fellow with the spotless record got rebuked. Why? Unfair, we're quick to react, and unwise.

What will happen to us if we take our cue from this story and the judgment Jesus made? What will happen to our morality? What will happen to our society if those who do good are discredited and those who are rascals have halos handed out to them?

Why did Jesus tell this story? Surely not to tell us that our behavior, whether good or bad, doesn't matter. Nor does he want us to believe that a man's record will be completely ignored. Jesus primary concern here is a matter of attitude.

It's an account of two men with different attitudes about God, themselves, and each other. It's crystal clear — the one thought of God as someone he could get to listen to his recital of self-praise; the other thought of God as someone who would listen to his cry for help.

The one saw himself as much better than others; the other saw himself as much worse than others. The one needed God's help; the other didn't. And there isn't much that God can do for a person whose only subject of conversation, even in God's presence, is his own self-praise.

. . . come now, we're made of wicked stuff, aren't we? Times without number we seem to take a foot forward only to slip back a yard in a split second. But be that as it may, we really have a lot going for us. We have a Heavenly Father who is ever willing to stick with us even when we fall. He's the divine optimist who counts heavily upon the direction in which we'll face after we fumble and falter. That man called Peter knew all about it . . .

Saints and Sinners

Peter then denied again; and immediately the cock crew.

—John 18:27

Who was it who said, "Every saint has his past and every sinner has his future"? Put so well, it is a reading of life as seen through Christian lens.

If God in Christ has come to mean anything at all to us, it's simply this: He knows the stuff of which we are made and continues to think in terms of what we can become. Halos are not necessarily out of style for those whose feet are clay, and a pair of angel's wings need not be denied anyone whose soaring potential remains seemingly limited.

But going back at once to that quotation about saints and sinners, this whole business of baseness — and blessedness — is ever cause for utter amazement. Fairly incredible is the evil of which man can be part and even design; equally startling is the good he can know — and even enjoy! Most of us experience a great deal of difficulty in saying all this in the same breath, of seeing the extremes of the spectrum simultaneously.

Yet God's kind of fairness demands that it be done this way. Otherwise, we would become creatures without hope, and of all that could happen to us, nothing could be more miserable!

Now all of this is prefatory — the complete background against which we consider the personalities involved in the betrayal and the denial of our Lord by members of the disciple band. To be discerned somehow and somewhere in the fabric of a man touched by Christ could be something of both the saint and the sinner, of both the hero and the weakling, of both the brave and the coward.

So, let us talk about that man Peter. First off, there's that label. As we speak (and all too often with unjustified self-confidence, another name for self-righteousness), we refer to him as "the denier," branding him in loveless manner as we do Judas.

Surely, this is not to gloss over the facts. Peter did deny his Lord. And the Gospel record is clear on this matter; indeed, it details it all quite plainly. Predicted by Christ in advance,

when it was done by Peter, it was still done very deliberately. There before us, exposed for all time, is Peter's act of denial: All the weakness of human nature declared as Exhibit A in the courtroom drama called "Man vs. God."

But note this carefully: God does not consign at once to the tortures of the damned any man because of a single act of denial! No, not even for that act repeated three times, so long as He has reason to believe that the sinner is capable of contrition and remorse, the stuff out of which saints are fashioned! If we can put it in our nobler moments — "every prisoner is entitled to his day in court" — how much more wonderful is God's allowance that every sinner could have his future, and, hopefully, a time of reclamation and conversion.

This, you see, is what we all too easily forget in our dealings with people. That's what those folks forgot back there in the days following the crucifixion, and they became a lot to be pitied — that is, if we can believe the legend. You see, the report spread about Peter's denial, and associated with it was that prediction of the rooster crowing. People who knew all this, it has been said, would imitate the crowing whenever Peter went by.

For shame upon them. Deny he did, but a man must be judged by the whole tenor of his life. Christ reckons not with man's failures as such; His primary concern is with the man — with the kind of man — who does the failing.

The symbol for God's courtroom is not lady justice blindfolded. God's eyes are open wide, and they search the very depth of a man's inner soul. Before God, it's never a man's deeds alone that are on trial; it is the man himself — the kind of man he is.

Why can we say this? What justification do we have for so great a hope? Peter is an excellent example. He who denied eventually became the stalwart among the saints, and all because Jesus is never less than Love in dealing with us — Love which simply is another word for redeeming patience and trust.

The glory is not Peter's. It's in the exceedingly precious truth that Christ-the-denied never denies us.

Now, think about that for a while — a good long while. It could be the one saving truth that could lead you all the way to heaven's gate.

. . . it happens every day: goodness is lavishly spent, and seemingly to no avail. Those to whom we show kindness, even love, can be so unappreciative. Really now, is there anything quite as deplorable as wasted goodness? Yes. You know what it is? There is something worse than wasted goodness; it is goodness that is boarded . . .

In God's Way

Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

—*Luke 6:36*

By its very nature, this text either repels or attracts people to the Christian faith. Some persons, when confronted by these words of Christ, shrug their shoulders and walk away, saying either "impossible" or "unrealistic." Others, fewer in number, find here a challenge; they endeavor to walk in the way of God's Great Galilean.

People who shy away from this rule maintain that it's about all one can do to live on the basis of justice, since it is a sizable struggle to be decent and fair with others. To treat them with mercy, which means being kind and gracious to the undeserving, is too much to expect in the kind of world in which we live.

There is, of course, always the temptation to tamper with Scripture. Try as we may, the words remain just as they are, and our Lord intended them to mean exactly what they say. His life itself would spell the lie to anything less.

So, we are encountered by the spirit of Christ in these words. Spoken to those who would be His disciples, we recognize at once that this is no mere suggestion. Clearly and explicitly stated, this passage of Scripture is seen as a command. And this is the point at which we must begin if we are to follow His teaching.

Christ did not offer His recruits any alternative. It is not His nature to say to them — "If, by any chance you'd care to consider this as a possibility, may I suggest that you think in terms of mercy — ." Because He knows what is best, it is the best that He requires from His followers.

As soon as we begin to show an interest in what He demands, we become impressed with the fact that His way is a positive approach. For thousands of years before His day, there was much talk about the proper way to deal with people, and its chief element was one of negation.

Good and ethical behavior was patterned, before Christ's time, after this negative principle:

The harm that you don't want others to do to you, don't do to them. The note struck by Jesus is somewhat different since "be merciful" is a far cry from "don't injure."

But dare we be merciful? Can one afford to take the initiative in being kind and gracious? How do we know that we will receive similar treatment in return? Aren't there always those who will exploit our generosity? With the world's great need for love, shouldn't we make certain that it is shared economically, shall we say? And, after all, is there anything more tragic than wasted goodness? The answer is yes.

Something more tragic than wasted goodness is goodness that is hoarded, a heart that refuses to become big. Mercy invariably takes a risk, and the world's greatest adventure is love. Every time a child is born, the world repeats the risk-taking. What mother refuses to deal lovingly with her child for fear that once the formative years are passed that such love will have been wasted?

If this is the rule by which motherhood operates, what shall we say of the even greater magnanimity which is God's, by which the sun shines or the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike?

God's generosity is what the true follower of Jesus must emulate. But can he? The antagonist may here accuse the Christian of talking out of both sides of his mouth. He admits his sinful nature, yet at the same time he quotes Scripture which, as the Lord's word, admonishes him to be perfect, to be as merciful as God in heaven. Now which is it to be? Can one be both sinner and saint at the same time?

The truth of the matter was fully recognized by Jesus. In the same passage of the Bible as our text, He states that blind men cannot lead the blind. Sinners who remain as sinners are incapable of improving the human scene. But, by the grace of God, sinners are redeemed. In their redemption, they deliberately strive for a way of living that is over and beyond the sinner's. So our Lord constantly sets before them His way of mercy and love and asks that they accept it as their way of life, and that good men again endeavor to be generous in God's generous way.

The disciple who stepped aside

"One of the two which heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon . . . and brought him to Jesus."
(JOHN 1:40-42)

JESUS never intended to guide and direct the kingdom on earth all by himself. Right at the start he looked around for certain people, recruits for leadership posts, and gathered them together into a company of the twelve. One of this group was named Andrew. He was among the very first to be called.

How much do you know about him? Probably not very much. He wrote no book, preached no sermon. He never quite made the oft-mentioned "inner circle" of Peter, James, and John. Nonetheless, Andrew and his kind must be seen for what they are, despite the fact that they are forever "the overshadowed."

And that's the word that has to be brought out into the open and called by its rightful name. It's the one glaring fact that constantly attended him, even as the scriptures record it: "Andrew, Simon Peter's brother." He was overshadowed the first day he met Christ! It's as though Jesus immediately turned his eyes from the introducer to the introduced and gave his undivided attention.

What seemingly extravagant thing he declared to Andrew's brother in their conversation—something about making him into a brand new kind of person who would become as solid as a rock. So great would be the transformation that he'd have an entirely different name to go along with it. All the while, mark you, Andrew is off to the side with never so much as an indication that anything so remarkable as that would be said of him.

Well, there you have it. From the very



moment that he introduced Simon Peter to Christ, Andrew was overshadowed. But it never drove him to one appointment after another on a psychiatrist's couch! Andrew teaches us that one can learn to accept the fact of being a lesser light, and in doing so discover the meaning of one's role in life. And what was his role? Andrew is the introducer, and Christ's purpose for his life was fulfilled in this regard.

By serving as an introducer, he constantly ran the risk of having the light turn at once from him to someone else. He becomes the "patron saint," if you please, of all who are willing to assume the secondary role, unhesitatingly (and what is even more, ungrudgingly) to step aside. Andrew, bless his soul, presumably never got that same favorable glance which Jesus gave to his brother, to James, and to John.

He never went to the Mount of Transfiguration, he never was invited to the Garden of Gethsemane, he had no memory of standing alone as John did in the shadow of the cross and having Christ give him a special and precious assignment to fulfill.

But he could think of himself as an introducer who knew what it was to step aside graciously.

He introduced a boy to Jesus one day—a boy with his lunch that became part and parcel of the miraculous feeding of thousands.

He introduced a group of Greeks, who when they came seeking Jesus were directed by Andrew into the Master's presence.

The world is better off and surely the kingdom is advanced by those who may see their duty in stepping aside, even though it may mean being overshadowed. People still put it this way: Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. But what a brother! ■



. . . running away is something that goes on all the time. Any number of people find themselves in well-nigh intolerable situations and decide to hit the road. Maybe it's not so bad — this running-away-business — as long as a fellow has someone to whom to run and whose value judgments are worthy of respect. That's what a man named Onesimus found out when he ran away from a man named Philemon only to run into a man named Paul . . .

The Third Man

For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever.

Philemon 1:15

Let's think about the grace of God as it became operative in two men, a master and a slave.

Philemon is the master, and Onesimus is the servant or slave. You can read all about them in the New Testament letter that goes by Philemon's name because it was written to him. Don't read any further now until you've read that letter to Philemon — all 25 verses. It will take you, at average reading time, about two minutes and 12 seconds.

Philemon had got a good dose of religion. It took so well that in no time at all he turned his home into a church. Preacher Paul must have been proud of him, at least it surely sounded like that from the letter he wrote to him.

But that wasn't the main reason that he wrote one of the grandest of all the letters in the New Testament. He had something else in mind besides a congratulatory note to his highly esteemed friend. He wrote the letter because of Onesimus, the servant or the slave who had run away.

We can only speculate as to why he ran away.

Could be that he got fed up with his master's new life-style. Since Philemon got religion and turned his house into a church, poor Onesimus probably had his work load doubled or tripled. There were all those people showing up. That meant extra water had to be

drawn, heated. More people to feed. And all that cleaning up which had to be done after they had those eating, preaching, praying, singing sessions!

Or maybe the two of them had a quarrel over some matters such as the condition of his sleeping quarters, or the failure of Philemon to get him medical treatment when he had that miserable dysentery.

Then there's the outside chance that some civil rights worker had come to Colossae and stirred the fire of freedom in his soul and made him so dissatisfied with his situation that he lost no time in hitting the road.

The strangest thing happened to the runaway Onesimus. He ran straight into the Apostle Paul. And that leads us to observe that it isn't perhaps what one runs away from as much as what one runs to!

Paul, as a Christian, recognized the need to be the reconciler. He couldn't possibly think in any other terms. As God sent Christ into the world to deal specifically with our differences — the differences created by our heinous sins, our downright wicked behavior — so Paul believed Christians shouldn't lose any time in getting reconciled. If they couldn't do it on their own, he knew the grace of God is always readily available.

Recognizing that fact, he wrote to Philemon and told him in plain language that he was sending Onesimus back to him and that as Christians they had no choice but to get along — by the grace of God, that is!

Now the conclusion of the matter: This is a story of two men plus a third. And the third, without whom God can't operate, is the reconciler!

. . . when in Rome do as the Romans do is good advice. Granted, of course, you're every bit a Roman! That's the way it really was at one time. And it made all the difference in the world. Those citizens of Rome knew exactly who they were and how they were meant to behave. That's why the preacher-man-who-got-around, a man once named Saul, took a page from their book and passed it along to his Christian compatriots . . .

Colony of Heaven

... but our commonwealth is in heaven.

—Philippians 3:20 (R. S. V.)

Here is an interesting figure of speech. What do you suppose prompted the Apostle Paul to use it?

Undoubtedly he was borrowing from his own knowledge of Roman history when he wrote these words. Desirous of giving his fellow believers a vivid picture by which they would better understand Christian strategy, he takes an idea from Rome's phenomenal success in empire building.

It has been said that when Augustus became the first emperor of Rome he was confronted with the problem of keeping intact an empire stretching from the North Sea to the Sahara Desert, from the Atlantic Ocean to the River Euphrates. Populated by a variety of peoples and cultures, each section was different. How could he manage all these people wisely and well, and keep them according to Rome's spirit?

Clever man that he was, he hand-picked certain people from Rome and relocated them throughout the realm. He actually studded the many diverse parts of the empire with little groups of men and women. It was as though he said:

"No matter where you may live, you must never live less than a Roman. Regardless of the pattern of society of the people about you, always maintain the glorious standards of Rome. Be in each of these separated areas as a little colony of Rome."

The idea paid off. As the decades passed, the true stamp of Rome itself was found everywhere. Each little colony exerted its influence so well that in time many non-Romans were offered citizenship because they reflected the true and genuine spirit of the original Romans who came to live among them.

With this so very probably in the back-

ground of his mind, Paul points up for us what the Christian can and should accomplish in this world. The whole world is God's realm. Christ sends His followers into every part of it to live as His citizens . . . as people whose true commonwealth is heaven. Just as the Romans remained faithful to all that was Roman, irrespective of where they were, just so the followers of Christ should remain true to the standards of their religion.

The emperor of Rome addressed his subjects thus: "You are to live as Romans, not only while you are in the capital city, but also in whatever part of the realm to which you may go." Could it likewise be that Christ challenges us . . . "You are to live as a citizen of heaven no matter where you may go on earth. Never be less than a true follower of mine!"

It has been said that there was a time in Great Britain when any man who entered military service was expected to wear his uniform at all times. So he would be reminded that wherever he was, he was always at one and the same time a defender of his land, a protector of all things cherished highly.

It is a far cry from Lynn Harold Hough's little old lady. One of the great preachers of a generation or so ago, he used to tell his hearers about a woman who had a lavender and lace dress. It would hang in the closet until Sunday morning when she would wear it as she went to church. When she returned home, she would change her clothing and the lavender and lace dress went back to the closet until the following Sunday morning.

The sad fact was that the dress was a symbol of her religion, which, too, was a one-day-a-week affair!

We apply the truth to ourselves, don't we? Who take the name of Christ are in duty bound to live daily . . . anytime . . . anywhere . . . as people owing allegiance to God Himself. So we set the standards for others until they, also, take on the very spirit by which we are possessed.

. . . the Kingdom on this earth is kept alive at times because God must work through the second-best that men like Gamaliel offer Him . . .

A Man Named Gamaliel

"Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel . . ."

—Acts 5:34

It was another crisis in the life of the early church. Peter, its illustrious leader, had a way of getting involved. Today, it was a riot; yesterday, it was a clash with the authorities of either church or state; tomorrow, it might be another session in jail.

A short while ago, he had been in the common prison. At this stage in the development of things, Peter's more effective witnessing was to take place beyond the jail's enclosure. God, therefore, arranges for his miraculous escape.

Having discovered that their charges were no longer in jail, the officials demanded that they be found. Where do you suppose Peter and the others had gone? They were in the temple area, preaching again — doing the same thing that had infuriated the authorities earlier.

"We warned you" is the way they were greeted by the incensed high priest. "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching."

To all of this, Peter gave his classic and eloquent reply: "We must obey God rather than men." And then he went on to preach a sermon to them.

What does one do with a man like that? It wasn't difficult for the council to decide. They wanted to kill him at once, and the others with him. It would have been the end of Peter and company right there if it hadn't been for the man named Gamaliel.

A highly respected teacher, he had the confidence of many people. Skillfully, he succeeded in quieting the mob and gaining their attention. Murder was only seconds away. Will he light the fuse by which the hate in their hearts will explode, or will he, of all things, take a forthright stand for Peter?

The latter, of course, represents our wishful thinking. As spectators, 2,000 years removed, we would like so much to have had Gamaliel stand up and recite the speech we would have written for him: "I cast my lot with Peter. This man and his kind are absolutely right in their intention to give expression to the divine compulsion which is laid upon them. I take my stand in their favor."

But Gamaliel didn't talk like that, and chances are we wouldn't have, either. He did, however, do something almost as grand. He made a remarkable speech in which he pleaded for a non-interference policy in their behalf. Had Gamaliel not spoken the way he did, the leadership of the early Christian Church would have been wiped out with one swell stroke.

So, the Kingdom on this earth is kept alive at times because God must work through the second-best that men like Gamaliel offer him. It would have been a much finer thing if we could have seen the distinguished teacher fully supporting the Cause of Christ. While Gamaliel could not embrace it, neither did he want to be numbered with those who would strongly oppose it.

Great is our debt to those who support eagerly and enthusiastically the Cause of Christ, even at the risk of death itself. Yet, we dare not forget how much we may owe to men like Gamaliel who, even though they cannot help the cause outright, they will take a stand to see that others do not hurt it!

Peter believed that the Kingdom could come only as he gave himself unstintedly, wholeheartedly to it. His commitment was essential. Gamaliel could not go that far. He was inclined to believe that God, granted no interference by men, would allow time itself to prove His case.

And time does witness effectively for Christ. Peter, however, has the thrill of helping to write the evidence. Gamaliel, while he may be instrumental in holding off some opposition, remains as one who only waits and observes.

. . . have you done much thinking about heaven lately? Once there was an old man. Call him, go ahead if you wish, call him 'the-old-man-of-the-island'. He had a lot of time on his hands and did a great deal of divine reflecting. He thought and thought so much about heaven that he honestly believed he could see it. Bless his soul! Just in one verse alone out of all that he recorded (Revelation 7:9) he came up with at least three grand and good things about heaven that hold us in good stead . . .

Picture of Heaven

After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.

—Revelation 7:9

Have you ever wondered what heaven is like? Most of us are naturally curious about the life to come. Since many of us refuse to believe that death is the end, we are concerned with what it will be like after we have completed our earthly pilgrimage. Similarly we are interested in the state of those who have preceded us in death, departing this life in the Christian faith.

God wants us to have an interest in heaven itself, and because of that Jesus gave a measure of assurance to the disciple band. On occasion he has allowed one of His saints to get a glimpse into Heaven and to share such revelation with us. This was particularly true for an old man by the name of John who lived on the isle of Patmos. The words of the text for this meditation give us something of the picture as he saw it.

Let us look at these words at close range, and discover for ourselves at least three different aspects of heaven.

To begin with, John tells us that it is made up of countless numbers of people. That's a comforting thought. Frequently we are made to think that all the people in the world are headed elsewhere. When the beloved apostle looked inside the great gate he saw so many people in the ranks of the redeemed that he couldn't possibly count all of them.

Because it is not given to us to search the hearts of men, we are unable to label all who are the heaven-bound as we walk among our fellow men day by day. Their number may be far greater than we may realize. Perhaps it would behoove each of us to treat with greater reverence the pilgrim we meet along the road.

John also paints heaven with people from all nations. How like God to have it that way. A most wonderful verse of Scripture, John 3:16, says that God loved the world. Wouldn't it seem reasonable to understand by his verse that God sees us all as one family of man?

He doesn't love us as Americans or Englishmen. He does not deal compassionately with us only as white people. When it comes to loving us, God is color-blind. When it comes to loving us, God doesn't deal in the distinctions we make by national boundaries.

Whenever we think of heaven we'd better remember it as John saw it. Thus we may be saved from the folly of "Americanizing" it, or of seeing it peopled only by those of our own race. Whatever else we may say about heaven, we may all have to admit that there is only one heaven. And that one heaven is God's, not ours.

The picture of heaven that God showed John was a place of much rejoicing. The inhabitants wear the victor's garments and they hold the palms of triumph. The battle is over. Sometimes it is majestically put this way: They have passed from the church militant into the church triumphant.

We do our friend in the faith an injustice when at his death we say "Poor Jim—." The New Testament interpretation of heaven does not allow for our pitying those who are blessed by the inheritance of it.

Life is a struggle. Each day that we live, the serious-minded can hear a clear call to do battle with the forces of evil. When death comes to the believer it can be as the time of victory, and heaven is so intended for those who have been made victorious by Christ.

So the holy man of God, John of Patmos, pictured heaven as it was revealed to him. As we look at it through his eyes, we may thank God for our loved ones who inherit it, and with more fervent resolve we should so live day by day in God's fear and favor that it may be ours, too, one day.

. . . we are a people of short-cuts, and none more so than the young. What is pre-marital sex or drug addiction but a perilous short-cut? . . .



We are in a hurry

One of the great steamship lines of the world once used the slogan: "Getting there is half the fun." But no matter how clever the promotional efforts the slogan never quite paid off. Why? Because people are in a hurry and sea travel takes time.

When we go anywhere, we look for a "direct-access route" so that we can get where we are going in the shortest possible time.

This may be all right if saving time is absolutely necessary—an emergency trip to a hospital or a physician's office, or the fire engine's journey to your house.

On the other hand, consider a hurried trip my wife and I made from New York City a short time ago. Getting the car from the parking lot and leaving Lincoln Tunnel behind us, we arrived home four hours, 240 miles, and four states later. So what? En route nothing had happened to us: We had talked to no one, had made no new friends, and had not helped anyone. We returned much the same as we had left.

As a boy in Sunday school, I remember learning about the Israelites wandering 40 years in the wilderness. I got excited about God telling the chosen ones that there was a Promised Land awaiting them. After 200 years of longing for it, they now had the "go signal."

Their destination was really a short dis-

tance across the border from where they were. But for them there was no direct route. God planned that they would have to take almost half a century (a lifetime for some of them) for the trip. Why?

God wasn't just interested in their reaching the Promised Land. He was concerned with the kind of people who would inhabit Canaan. They must be prepared for it. That was the purpose of the wilderness way: To make them ready. And preparation required time.

They needed time to learn how to live with one another and to regard their leadership. They needed time to learn how to trust God and to acknowledge the validity of his ground rules. They needed time not only to be given the Ten Commandments, but also to discover that God-given rules are the only rules that really make sense. These were the lessons that they had to master by living through a situation. No shortcut would do.

But we are a people of shortcuts, and none more so than the young. What is premarital sex or drug addiction but a perilous shortcut? Adolescence, in a sense, is life's roundabout way laid out by God. He just doesn't take a 12-year-old and plunge him into adulthood.

With God, it's what we learn on the way that makes us fit to stay—once we arrive at journey's end. —Raymond Shaheen

A black and white photograph showing a person in a dark uniform, possibly a sailor, standing on the deck of a ship. The person is seen from the back, looking out towards a hazy sea. The ship's structure, including a railing and part of the hull, is visible on the left. The text "Someone's coming" is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Someone's
coming

ONE OF MY most vivid childhood memories is that of a larger-than-life-size painting of the Ascension on the front wall of a church in my home town. Jesus was pictured going up into heaven, with clouds at his feet and clouds above him.

With a youngster's curiosity, I checked out the Biblical reference for that painting, and was much taken by the way the gospel writer put it: "This same Jesus that you see ascending up into heaven shall one day come again in glory."

Now that we are in the midst of the season of Advent, what can we say to those who ask "when will he come?"

There's only one answer to such a question: we don't know. That is, we don't know precisely the time. And we are not the first to ask the question. It was even put to our Lord himself when he was on earth. To those who asked, he answered something about no one knowing the exact time, not even the angels in heaven.

But even though we may not know the exact hour of his coming, we can talk about some of the conditions that are to be met if he is to make himself known to us now.

Let's begin with that verse of Scripture which goes like this: "where two or three are gathered together in my name." Do you remember how he ended that sentence? He said he would be present—in the

midst of those who had come together in his name.

Next, think about the most significant thing that Christians do together: partake of Holy Communion. Every time believers come together devoutly around his table, they have the assurance of his presence.

Then it must be said that whenever we dutifully perform acts of compassion—doing those things that Jesus delighted in doing—he draws near to us. That was his promise.

Alvin Rogness in one of his writings suggests that it is foolish for the children of God to engage in idle speculation or bitter controversy over the "how and when" of his coming. He reminds us of two men waiting at a railroad station for the arrival of a friend. One says, "I think he will come on the eight o'clock train." The other says, "No, I believe he will come at eleven o'clock—on that train." So they argue as to the exact hour. Arguing, they lose the joy which rightfully comes through anticipation. They also lose interest in doing Christ-like deeds.

Look for Christ's coming in glory? Of course. We order the days of our years by this hope, and those who will be most qualified to recognize him when he comes will be those who have been made aware of his nearness in every act of true worship, in every deed of compassion—*now*. ■

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